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PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT IN THE SOUTH ASIA REGION

The present document reports on and analyses major new trends and developments in UNICEF programme cooperation in the South Asia region during 1992.

The UNICEF regional office has responsibility for cooperation in the following countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

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I. OVERVIEW

1. In June 1991, the South Asia region was reconfigured to correspond more closely to the existing pattern of regional cooperation. This report, the first to reflect a full year of post-reorganization operations, has as its frame of reference the goals of the 1990s endorsed by the World Summit for Children. These goals were adapted to individual countries in the region through their national programmes of action (NPAs) and to the region as a whole at successive summits of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). In political and strategic terms, the most recent expression of this process for children in South Asia is the Colombo Resolution on Children, adopted in September 1992 by the SAARC Ministerial Conference on Children in South Asia.

2. This report analyses, with a regional perspective, the broad trends in relation to the goals for children. A brief description is given of what UNICEF has done at the regional level during the past year as a sustained strategy to influence the pace of progress.

3. Afghanistan has yet to emerge from the throes of a 14-year war, which has destroyed what few social and economic support services existed. In the absence of peace, national consensus or availability of information, Afghanistan cannot form part of a regional perspective and needs to be examined separately. The situation of children and women, and the prognosis, are discussed in the UNICEF annual report for that country.

4. As regards the rest of the region, the socio-political climate has never been more favourable for Governments and communities to work together to achieve the goals for children. The practical implications of sustaining this commitment are threefold:

(a) Local government must strengthen its professional and financial ability to support the community;

(b) Various groups, especially women, must be organized and informed so that they are able to participate;

(c) Professional and voluntary groups must support a partnership between the Government and local communities.

5. These principles are accepted at the highest political level. In fact, the economic constraints currently experienced by Governments in the region make it even more necessary to persuade, activate and support communities to promote basic human goals, giving children priority.

6. As Governments try to limit domestic deficits and external trade imbalances through tighter fiscal and monetary policies, they move away from bureaucratic management of economic activities and towards greater reliance on market mechanisms. This calls into question not just the amount of resources available for social support services, especially for large populations with little or no access to the market, but even more pertinently the efficiency and accountability with which resources are used at the local level. There is, thus, an added responsibility attached to the use of public funds, including

external assistance, in order to nurture the participatory process (mentioned above and elaborated in chapter III below).

II. TOWARDS THE DECADE GOALS

7. With regard to the decade goals for children, regional trends are positive, but the present pace of progress must accelerate. For example, except in Maldives and Sri Lanka, where the under-five mortality rate (U5MR) is relatively low (81 and 21 per 1,000 live births, respectively), SAARC member countries must make tremendous efforts to bring down rates of 126 to 205 per 1,000 live births to a more acceptable level, somewhere between 50 and 80. Regional commitment, as outlined in the Colombo Resolution, has led to the following goals for the mid-decade:

(a) Control of diarrhoeal diseases (CDD): universal use of oral rehydration therapy for home-based treatment and universal access to oral rehydration salts by 1996;

(b) Sanitation: doubling of current levels of access to sanitary means of excreta disposal by 1996;

(c) Immunization: reduction of vaccine-preventable diseases and elimination of neonatal tetanus by 1995;

(d) Iodine deficiency: universal access to iodized salt by 1995;

(e) Dracunculiasis (guinea worm disease): eradication by 1995.

8. The feasibility of achieving those goals has been tested, and viable implementation strategies have been formulated. Efforts must now be made to implement projects, community by community, on a national scale. Countries must then share their experiences, thus enhancing regional cooperation to reach common goals.

9. In the South Asia region, the maternal mortality rate is even more serious than U5MR. It ranges from 830 per 100,000 live births in Nepal to 330 per 100,000 live births in Maldives. (The sole exception in the region is Sri Lanka, where the rate is 60 per 100,000 live births.) What is needed is improved antenatal care and risk detection, as well as obstetric attention during childbirth. In addition, the Colombo Resolution calls for raising the minimum age of marriage to 18 years and providing access to family planning services in order to increase contraceptive use by 50 per cent by the year 2000. Raising the age of marriage (which in South Asia's experience has proven feasible) will have other positive effects, among them fewer maternal deaths, higher birth weight, higher female literacy and lower population growth.

10. Basic education, which ranks first on the list of common goals set by the Colombo Resolution for the mid-decade, poses a great challenge. The primary school completion rate (even with repetition in grade) is as low as 26 per cent in Bhutan, 27 per cent in Nepal, 46 per cent in Bangladesh, 51 per cent in Pakistan and 53 per cent in India. (Only Maldives and Sri Lanka have rates of

approximately 90 per cent.) To raise these levels, the Colombo Resolution sets the following goals:

(a) Access to, and enrolment in, primary education for at least 80 per cent of boys and 75 per cent of girls, and completion of primary education by at least 50 per cent of boys and girls by 1995;

(b) Reduction of adult and adolescent illiteracy from 1990 levels by 25 per cent by 1995.

11. This renewed commitment to basic education places some countries under unprecedented managerial and financial strain. All the same, countries and communities with scarce resources have broken away from conventional approaches and have adopted imaginative alternatives. In the process, the status accorded primary schools, primary schoolteachers and the training of primary schoolteachers is being reassessed, as is the traditional school examination system. More attention, however, needs to be given to other determinants of success: the link between early childhood experience and successful transition to school; critical survival through the first three grades; reform of the education system; and, not least, ending the "apartheid of gender". Countries in the South Asia region are acutely conscious of these constraints and have developed ingenious methods to overcome them.

12. Over extensive parts of South Asia, girls figure prominently in the category of children in especially difficult circumstances. If the Colombo Resolution's commitment to the progressive elimination of child labour appears brave, it is also a minimum condition for universal primary education. Girls are also the victims of child marriage; at least one half of all women in South Asia are married before 19 years of age. Social discrimination, economic deprivation and gender bias readily converge and, therefore, need to be tackled together. The unforeseen negative impact on children of the enlarging urban slum environment in South Asia adds another dimension to the need to achieve the goals for children in difficult circumstances, especially in relation to child abuse and disintegration of the family.

13. This leads to the link, increasingly recognized in policy-making in South Asia, between poverty reduction and the goals for children. In particular, the goal of reducing malnutrition can be reached only if macroeconomic policies are supplemented with a simultaneous plan to combat poverty and a strategy of community organization calculated to enhance local self-reliance.

III. PROCESSES AT WORK FOR CHILDREN

14. NPAs of the seven SAARC member countries, prepared with a decade perspective, are, in one way or another, part of national development plans, thereby strengthening their viability. However, not all NPAs forcefully support the new strategic thrust affirmed by the Colombo Resolution. Therefore, the Resolution urges each country to formulate an annual action plan on major goals and supporting goals, divided into compact administrative units, and to review and update the plan annually.

15. In December 1991, the SAARC Summit endorsed a decade plan of action for the girl child. Bangladesh and India have taken the lead in translating this into an action plan at national and local levels. This is essential in order to reduce the glaring gender disparities that prevail in most goal-related indicators. Other SAARC countries should emulate this plan, which is a vanguard of the NPA.

16. Against this background, certain processes have been or are being initiated across South Asia, with UNICEF assistance where possible (see chap. IV below):

(a) Disaggregating national goals by local government jurisdiction (rural and urban) for joint community/government action, based on annual plans;

(b) Organizing communities, especially women's groups, in rural and urban areas, to work with local government teams (which must be formed);

(c) Reallocating domestic and external resources in support of the decade goals, based on an assessment of costs and consistent with strategies leading to community-based implementation and monitoring. This process will apply at both community and national levels;

(d) Harmonizing national laws with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, providing a legal lever for implementation of the Convention;

(e) Regional training for professional development in communication and community awareness in priority, goal-related areas (e.g., basic education, child protection and raising the female age of marriage);

(f) Forming political pressure groups of elected representatives at local, regional and national levels to promote and monitor progress;

(g) Creating a regional professional network of South Asian "eminent persons" to pursue goals in established and new fields;

(h) Conducting comparative studies of successes in the region in goal-related areas (e.g., basic education and sanitation);

(i) Regional mapping, analysis and evaluation studies of critical issues (e.g., iodine deficiency, girls' education, female illiteracy, early marriage, maternal mortality, child trafficking, child labour and poverty);

(j) Analysing and updating annually social indicators by identified regional network of institutions;

(k) Disseminating within and outside the region the results of the above efforts through special as well as regular publications.

IV. UNICEF REGIONAL AGENDA

17. In its efforts to support and facilitate regional cooperation, UNICEF seeks to mobilize and interact with the vast existing networks of qualified professionals and others concerned with child development issues in the region.

Governments must take advantage of the wisdom and initiative of the community and voluntary organizations. In building a partnership between the Government and the community, professional groups, irrespective of whether they are in or outside of the Government, have a crucial role. In the region, UNICEF acts as an interdisciplinary group with a clearly defined responsibility to work with similar groups on common concerns. Its role has evolved significantly during 1992 and will move ahead in 1993, along the following lines.

A. Regional professional network

18. UNICEF has been instrumental in the formation of small, high-level professional groups across the region. Eleven "groups of seven" met in the spring of 1992. Their members included health professionals, educators, communicators, economists, statisticians, jurists, social development workers, religious leaders, parliamentarians and those active in support of the girl child and urban child. These independent panels agreed on certain strategies and policy goals to be carried out by themselves and by others. Their combined report was presented to the SAARC Ministerial Conference on Children in South Asia held in 1992 and is being widely disseminated as the "South Asia Consultations on Achieving the Goals".

19. Later in 1992, at least two more groups emerged in the region. Their country-by-country report, "Space for the Child", was published as a booklet. Another new professional group, which interacts with UNICEF, is a five-country group on the tribal child. This group has launched a project to conduct a comparative study of five tribal communities in the five larger SAARC countries. This contribution from South Asia, which should be completed during 1993, is part of the International Year for the World's Indigenous People.

20. Members of these eminent regional panels from the same country form a core, interdisciplinary group at the national level. The group plays an advisory, catalytic role in the emerging community/government partnership in developing and monitoring the progress of the NPA. At the country level, UNICEF plans to support and enlarge this core group.

B. Professional development

21. Apart from regular staff training in areas of identified need, the professional quality and contribution of UNICEF staff are being enhanced by close interaction on South Asia's common problems, exchanging experience, building confidence and assisting in such fields as education, health, planning, communication, urban services, children in difficult circumstances and operational issues.

C. Knowledge, analysis and evaluation

22. There are three broad areas of concern where there is a need to deepen understanding in order to revise policy and programmes: (a) such problem areas as health, nutrition, education and protection that directly affect children; (b) systems that enhance or limit child development, such as economic

structures, demographic pressures, physical environment, service systems and sources of social support; and (c) socio-political structures and processes that promote or hinder policy and management of human development. Typically, problems in this third area relate to the transfer of resources and responsibilities to local communities, strengthening local governments, decentralizing power and streamlining social development and priorities for human and child development.

23. In collaboration with the professional networks established in 1992, UNICEF has supplemented current efforts through: a study of problem areas; operational research on possible solutions; "mapping" of problems common to different countries; monitoring of ongoing efforts across the region and evaluation of results; investigation of enabling communities to take charge of their goals; increasing resources; making better use of available resources; and coordinating efforts across professional disciplines and government departments.

D. Publications

24. Several reports were published in 1992 in addition to the "South Asia Consultations" and "Space for the Child" mentioned above. They include: Perspectives (a statistical profile that will be updated each year via region-wide institutional collaboration); Future (a development quarterly from Kathmandu, Nepal); Links (a news bulletin); and Search (an annotated bibliography).

25. Another example of enhanced professional cooperation in communication is the creation of "Meena", a positive role model for the girl child in South Asia. "Meena" figures as a character in both animated videos and in children's books and other print media.

V. CONCLUSION

26. During 1992, seven countries in the region were implementing NPAs. As a symbol and measure of real progress towards the goals for children in the 1990s, action plans for the girl child are now being launched. Governments in the region have also agreed to a set of goals for 1995 and 1996, common to South Asia as a whole, matched by alternative approaches in terms of strategies and resources. Accordingly, progress is both possible and essential at local, national, regional and global levels. As outlined in the present report, exciting opportunities are currently available to UNICEF to share resources, achieve common goals and implement regional strategies.